The Role of the Public in Visual Impact Assessment

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It is appropriate that people participate in decision making that may seriously affect their wellbeing. The unmistakable trend is toward greater public participation in environmental decision making, beyond simply identifying issues in the EIS scoping process and commenting on draft EISs. Increasingly, the public is involved throughout the visual impact assessment (VIA) process, identifying valued places and views, and providing project-specific feedback about potential visual impacts. Through the use of visual simulations and user intercept surveys, viewers are indicating—in the field—the acceptability of particular proposed projects that may affect the places they value, whether it is their community or their favorite recreation spot.

The use of user intercept surveys and simulations offers several benefits for VIA. Viewers are sampled in the potentially affected area, while engaged in location-appropriate activities that influence their level of engagement with the surrounding scenery. The survey includes a realistic representation of the proposed project that is referenced as they make judgments about how the visual change would affect their enjoyment and future use of the setting. The user intercept survey with simulations offers a much more realistic setting for the public's judgement about visual effects, and more importantly, allows a sample of the potentially impacted users to directly communicate how they think the change will impact them. Instead of a VIA professional speaking on their behalf about the potential effect on the view, they speak for themselves.

Few would question the benefit of having people judge for themselves how they will be affected by a proposed visual change. The validity is increased by making these judgements while experiencing the setting where the change will be visible. However, photomontage simulations are only approximations of the potential visual change. In the best of situations, they are close approximations of the appearance of proposed facility at a given time of day in a given lighting situation. In the worst situations, they are serious misrepresentations. They are limited in their accuracy and realism, do not show motion, and lack the dynamic range and detail perceivable by the human eye. At best, simulations are snapshots of a possible reality. Problems with simulations can be very subtle, and it may take a trained professional to spot them. A knowledgeable VIA professional should be aware of the limitations of simulations, and should factor these limitations into their judgements about impacts. Is the public really seeing a complete and accurate representation of the future when they consider visual simulations? If they aren't, can we really trust their judgements about project impacts?

In this discussion, Jim Palmer and Bob Sullivan will start a group discussion by briefly offering perspectives on the use of intercept surveys and simulations in VIA, and the larger issue of the roles of the public and the professional in the VIA process. The audience will be invited to participate.